



WAKE UP THE TIME IS NEAR

Text: Romans 13:11-14

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Are you a night owl or a morning lark? Depending on which one you are may affect how easily you wake up of a morning. Sometimes it doesn't matter how slowly you wake up. Other times it is more urgent. Once when Liz was babysitting our grand children at their family unit, they could hear the high pitch of the fire alarm in a neighbour's unit and smell smoke. Then the neighbours were banging on the door of that unit desperately trying to get the resident to wake up. In the end the fire men knocked down the door and carried him out and took him to hospital with smoke inhalation. Poor guy was oblivious to what was happening when he should have been awake to what was going on.

In Matthew 2 we read of a situation where the people were not very awake to what was going on. Jesus had been born in Bethlehem. You would think that was a big event that had everyone excited. But they were oblivious to it. Bethlehem is only an hour's walk down hill from Jerusalem. Yet when the Magi turned up asking about the newborn king, nobody knew anything about it. When the chief priests and teachers were asked about locating the Christ child they were quick to point out Micah's prophecy that he would be born in Bethlehem. But you notice when the wise men set off for Jerusalem it is striking that no one is mentioned as going along with them. You get the impression that except for the faithful few like Simeon and Anna, the people had little interest or expectancy for the Christ. Perhaps it seemed unreal. After all it was 400 years since the last prophet Malachi had spoken. It was a 1000 years since David was given the promise that his son would rule forever. No they were not awake to the arrival of Jesus.

In this period of Advent we think not only of Jesus' first coming. We also focus on his second coming. I wonder how prepared and expectant we are for that? Are we anymore prepared than the people in Jerusalem were for Christ's first coming? I remember when I was a teenager I had a dream that really shook me. I was so scared that I broke out in a cold sweat. You see I dreamt that Jesus had returned. There was Jesus, coming on the clouds. And I was not ready! I don't remember much of the details but I recall having a sense of panic. Thoughts such as 'What is Jesus doing here already? He is not supposed to be here yet' tumbled over one another. And that gave rise to questions like 'Have I put my trust in Jesus? What was I doing when he came? Did he catch me in a bad moment?' I had always intended doing the right thing and loving Jesus. But I was uncertain as to where my commitments and lifestyle were. And that left me with a feeling of terror. 'I'm too late. Jesus why have you come so soon. I am not ready'. When I reflect back on that dream I realise it was an act of grace on God's part to spur me on.

I don't want to unnecessarily startle you but I may need to rouse you if you are spiritually asleep and say 'Wake up!' We need to be awake because Jesus is coming and we need to be ready. On that score, let me ask you: do we seriously live in the expectation that Jesus could come at any moment? Are we deeply longing for him to come and bring justice and peace to this world? Are our normal, everyday lives of work and home life, entertainment and study really lived in that expectation? Is there a vibrancy in our lives because of that? Is there an urgency to share the gospel because of that? Do we live with the possibility Jesus could be here tomorrow or even still today? Or do we perhaps feel that it's been 2000 years since the first time Jesus came, and the way things are it seems he won't be coming for a long time yet. So there's still plenty of time to do what we want for ourselves. Plenty of time before we get all worked up about sorting out our relationship with Jesus. Plenty of time to get involved in making disciples. Are we a sleepy little group that just plods along. There is no urgency. No expectations. Do you hear what the Apostle Paul says in our text? (Romans 13:11) *"Wake up! Wake up from your slumber. Wake up because our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. Wake up! The night is nearly over. The day is almost here!"*

When we do a careful reading of the New Testament we notice something striking. We see again and again that the apostles urge the believers to live in a certain way because of the nearness of Christ's return. We see here in Romans 12 & 13 Paul has been instructing the Christians how to live with each other. And also how to live under the

government of the day. And he sums it all up by saying in 13:8-10 "*Love your neighbour as yourself. Love is the fulfilment of the law*". Then in our text Paul gives the motive, the drive for this way of life "*And do this understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to be awake from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed..*" Paul goes on to say "*The night is nearly over, the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently as in the daytime.*"

In the Bible the reference to 'the day' is shorthand for 'the Day of the Lord'. It's the day of judgement. It refers to Christ's return when everyone will be judged and all things made new. So when Paul writes of the 'night' he means the present world and age in which we now live. This current age is nearly over. Paul describes this age in terms of 'night life'. 'Night' means 'under the cover of darkness'. Think of the list Paul mentions in verse 13 "*...orgies and drunkenness...sexual immorality and debauchery...dissension and jealousy..*". It is usually at night time that people get drunk. It is under cover of darkness that most crimes are committed. It is usually at night that "*orgies*" and "*other sexual immoralities*" take place. It is under cover that people scheme "*dissension*" to bring others down. It is in private that we gossip and express "*jealousy*". These things are done at 'night', so to speak, because they are too shameful to be done in broad daylight. All you have to do is read the daily paper, listen carefully to the subdued whispers and you realise that our world is so much living in the "*night*". What shame will be exposed when suddenly the light is turned on? When 'the Day of the Lord' comes, when Jesus returns in judgement, what will the bright daylight expose?

'Well' says Paul 'for you Christians that bright daylight should not expose shame on you. Because you have been expecting that day. Instead of gratifying your desires, under the cover of darkness, you have clothed yourself with Christ.' Notice the expression in verse 14 "*Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ..*" In the Old Testament we find the imagery of a sinner wearing filthy rags. Forgiveness as about putting on bright new clothes. In other words we are forgiven. So we live differently. Paul is saying to the effect 'You, Christian, wear Christ's mantle of righteousness. You have the power of the Spirit. You have the armour of light. You live changed lives. So you should already be living decently as in the day time.' Put another way, we should be living now as if Jesus had already returned.

Now this coming of Jesus should not be seen as some big stick over our heads that forces us to live Christianly. We are not like a bunch of rowdy school kids who all of a sudden are at their best behaviour because the school principle walked in. Rather Christ's coming is what we want. It is what we live for. We are working and struggling for the coming of the kingdom. Aren't we?! Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5 *"You are all sons and daughters of the light and of the day. We do not belong to the night or darkness. We are not in the darkness so that the day should surprise you like a thief."* The Day of Christ's return should not be a surprise. It is what we look for everyday. But on the other hand our eager expectation for Christ's return should not make us 'so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use', as someone once put it. Martin Luther once made the remark even if he knew for certain Jesus was coming tomorrow, 'I would still plant my apple tree'. We were made to live. And to live on this earth. We are not to be keen to get away from life or the earth. Not like some sect with a suicide pact.

Rather, we should be keen to live life as it is meant to be lived. As "children of the day" we are eagerly expecting the Christ. Because then all things will be restored. Then we will live life and work and play and explore and enjoy creation, without sickness, without pain, without hunger, without war, without frustration, without death, without sin! Every time in our prayers we ask God for an end to war, or sickness or suffering, what we are really requesting is 'Come Lord Jesus, come quickly!' The church is like a bride eagerly waiting her beloved who is coming back from a long journey. In the Bible days after a man proposed marriage to his beloved he would go off to get the new marital home ready. When it was all done he would come with his male friends to collect his bride. The bride would be waiting expectantly with her bridesmaids. She was always looking out the window, always ready for him to come. Every knock on the door made her excited. 'Is he there now?!' Such a bride was too much in love to notice any other man. It would only be if she thinks her beloved would never return or she lost her love for him, that she would look at other men and accept their proposals. The New Testament sees the church as 'the bride of Christ'. Christ the groom is off to get things ready. He is preparing the new home. And soon he will return to fetch his bride.

It may seem to us that Jesus is long in coming. And he still may be. It is nearly 2000 years ago that Paul wrote the words *"Wake up, for our salvation is near"*. But do not forget that a thousand years is as a day to God. And Jesus' return *"...will be like a thief in the night"* says Paul in Thessalonians. That is, when we least expect it. When Jesus

came the first time it was when Israel was at its lowest ebb. Conquered by Rome with a corrupt priesthood. And all hope drained from the people. They did not expect anything. When will Jesus come the second time? Nobody knows. But that he will come again is definite. It is so definite we can regard it as fact already. It is so sure that Jesus is as good as here now. That's why Paul can say 'It is near'. "*The night is nearly over; the day is almost here*". But Paul's emphasis here is not on the darkness that is passing away but on the light that is already dawning. The emphasis is that if the dawn of the age to come has arrived, then the sun of righteousness and joy and perfect peace will surely rise on the horizon in due time. As the theologians put it, his coming is 'imminent'. He is already here, but not yet. We live in overlapping times. The age of forgiveness and righteousness and life and peace and purity and health and light and joy has come with the arrival of Jesus Christ two thousand years ago. But the old age of guilt and sin and death and strife and sickness and darkness and misery still remains. We live in the overlap of these two ages. In Christ we are forgiven and accepted and empowered for holiness and love. But nothing is perfect yet on this earth. We still struggle with sin. We still get sick. We still die. But our hope in Jesus is certain, so certain is it already near! This is the expectancy and vibrancy of the whole New Testament.

Now this waiting for Jesus does not mean we sell everything, pack up a few clothes and head for the mountains. It means we live on this earth enjoying the good things God gives us. That we use the talents God has given us. That we are good stewards working with our Father's world. And that we are already now showing the world what living in the new day will be like. We are to give a taste of life on the new heavens and new earth. We are to be to the world the dawn of the new day. We are to be glimmers of the first light preparing for the day of Christ. Do you remember being up at the crack of dawn, when the first glimmer of daylight comes through. That's us! We live in such a way that reveals our hope. We live lives that attract others to become disciples of Jesus. We provide the h'orderves, the appetisers for the wedding feast of the Lamb. But it means we need to 'wake up' early! We need to be awake understanding the times.

Wake, awake, for the night is flying,
The watchmen on the heights are crying
Awake Jerusalem arise!
Midnight's solemn hour is tolling,

His chariots wheels are nearer rolling

He comes, prepare you virgins wise.

Rise up with willing feet

Go forth the Bridegroom meet.

Are you ready? This Advent don't just look back in history. Point forward to the imminent arrival of the Lord of all. Are you displaying the first light of the new day?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- What's the difference between a lifestyle of the 'night' as compared with that of the 'day' as Paul describes it? Can you recognise the two in our own communities, in our own situations?
- Do you live in the expectation that Jesus is coming back at any time? Is that part of how you experience Advent? How does it affect how you live?
- In what way are we the 'dawn of the new age' giving the world a taste of what is to come?